

# *Update on America Recycles Effort*

June 2019

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## Background

The U.S. recycling system is facing several significant challenges. Many consumers see recycling as an opportunity to help the environment, but even with the best intentions may place recyclable items in the trash and non-recyclable items in the recycling bin. Recent international policy changes have reduced available markets and our materials management infrastructure is no longer aligned with many of the materials used in the marketplace.

Despite these challenges, the U.S. recycling system remains an important part of conserving resources and protecting the environment and a critical sector of the U.S. economy. According to the U.S. EPA Recycling Economic Information Report, the U.S. recycling industry provides more than 757,000 jobs and \$6.7 billion annually in tax revenues.<sup>1</sup> In addition to these human resources, the materials themselves hold great value and there is opportunity for improved resource recovery, as recent data indicate that materials worth \$9 billion are thrown away each year.

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In 2018, EPA engaged with stakeholders including recyclers; brands; industry representatives and associations; and state, tribal and local government representatives and associations to identify key challenges facing the U.S. recycling system as well as ways for EPA to support stakeholders' efforts. EPA developed four action areas to summarize the feedback received through stakeholder engagement efforts. The four action areas are:

1. Education and Outreach
2. Enhance Materials Management Infrastructure
3. Strengthen Secondary Material Markets
4. Enhance Measurement



## The America Recycles Day 2018 Summit

On November 15, 2018, EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler hosted the America Recycles Day Summit that brought together stakeholders from across the recycling system to join EPA in signing the America Recycles Pledge. All 45 signing organizations, including EPA, pledged to work together during 2019 to identify specific actions to take in addressing the challenges and opportunities facing the U.S. Recycling system. Through the pledge, organizations committed to leveraging their collective expertise, strengths, and resources to address these challenges and opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.epa.gov/smm/recycling-economic-information-rei-report>

## Formation of the America Recycles Workgroups

After EPA's 2018 America Recycles Day Summit, EPA worked with the 45 organizations that signed the America Recycles Pledge to form four workgroups aligned with the four action areas. The workgroups initiated their meetings in January 2019. Over the next three months, each workgroup identified a vision statement as well as challenges, opportunities, and potential actions within each action area. In its coordination and facilitation role, EPA developed this summary document, which represents the collective thinking and ideas of the America Recycles Workgroup members through April of 2019. EPA intends to publish additional information about the status of the America Recycles Workgroup activities on its web site in June 2019.

### Action Area 1: Education and Outreach

**Vision:** Clear, consistent messages about proper materials management activities enable consumers to recognize the value of reusing, recovering and recycling materials, as well as the value of buying products with recycled content.

**Challenges, Opportunities and Actions:** Workgroup members identified challenges related to inconsistent messaging on how to recycle due to localized differences; contamination; and increasing public awareness on the value of recycling. Developing consistent messages for key recycling issues was identified as a top priority for this workgroup. Additional actions under consideration include outlining a range of benefits for recycling, creating programs and information to highlight recyclables as valuable commodities, and conducting education and awareness campaigns to engage youth.

### Action Area 2: Enhance Materials Management Infrastructure

**Vision:** A holistic, modern and adaptable national recycling infrastructure that embraces innovation and is resilient to changes in material streams, markets and consumer expectations.

**Challenges, Opportunities and Actions:** Workgroup members identified challenges and opportunities associated with resiliency, pricing, and localized differences in managing materials across the country. The creation of a virtual clearinghouse for information that is publicly available was identified as a top priority action. Additional actions under consideration include: developing a toolkit for state and local governments, materials recovery facilities (MRFs) and associated facilities; and promoting the design of "MRFs of the future" that can manage future challenges posed by the evolving materials stream.

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#### *America Recycles Workgroup Priority Actions*

*Develop consistent messages for key recycling issues.*

*Create a virtual clearinghouse of information, including case studies, best practices, and funding opportunities, that is publicly available.*

*Explore opportunities to spur regional and local market development activities.*

*Compile existing information on a range of metrics and measures for recycling and identify data gaps and needs.*

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### Action Area 3: Strengthen Secondary Materials Markets

**Vision:** High-quality recycled materials are produced that can be incorporated easily into products, driving demand and creating an integrated, robust and sustainable domestic recycling market.

**Challenges, Opportunities, and Actions:** Workgroup members identified challenges and opportunities related to supporting existing end-markets as well as developing new end-markets. The workgroup identified exploring opportunities to spur regional and local market development activities as a priority action. Additional actions under consideration include continuing to promote government programs to purchase recycled-content materials and products, such as the EPA's Comprehensive Procurement Guidelines (CPGs), exploring economic models to create robust and sustainable domestic secondary markets, and creating and promoting consistent standards for packaging materials and recycled commodities.

### Action Area 4: Enhance Measurement

**Vision:** Establish standardized recycling metrics that are supported by consistent terminology and methodology.

**Challenges, Opportunities, and Actions:** Workgroup members identified challenges and opportunities including new ways of measuring and the diversity and variety of measurement approaches across the country. The workgroup identified compiling information on a range of metrics and measures for recycling and identifying data gaps and needs as a priority action. Additional actions under consideration include working with states to understand what has already been collected, updating existing guides such as EPA's *Measuring Recycling – a Guide for State and Local Governments*, and fostering common measurement approaches and definitions.